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By: Dr. Ernie Flint, Area Agent/Agriculture

During the past two months, I have been exposed to more ornamental horticulture than I normally would have been in several years, and I have listened as widely known experts have expounded the virtues of many plants with names I had not heard. During this period the first Attala Master Gardener class of sixteen has been trained and released upon the community. After this there is no telling what you may see sprouting in the most unusual places around our area.

Getting back to the subject, I have marveled for most of my life at the beauty of the seemingly native plant we call wisteria. Every year it adorns many out-of-the-way places with its purple and blue pandemonium of color and its sweet aroma, yet very few references are made to this plant which has no rival in its ability to thrive in adversity. It even outgrows kudzu in soils of the upper coastal plain, leaving its big leafed cousin to dominate in the silt loam hills next to the delta. It thrives so well in Florida that it has been placed on that state's invasive plants list.

We simply call it wisteria, but technically it is *Wisteria sinensis* or Chinese Wisteria. This is the most common type of wisteria in this area, but several others may be found as well. This plant may grow as a pruned shrub or as a vine; it can even be trained as a potted "bonsai" tree and kept indoors for many years. It may be trained to an arbor or attached to a building as

an espaliered vine. The white variant called *alba*, is especially attractive next to water where its cascading white blooms can be reflected. White wisteria is also found growing essentially wild around this area.

Under normal conditions, all wisterias should bloom, but since the plant varies quite a lot some types may bloom earlier in the life of the plant than others. The abundance of blooms may vary also with the severity of winter weather since flower buds may be damaged by freezing. The plant is adapted to low fertility and normally blooms best if not fertilized.

Wisteria is a member of the legume family, which for you folks who studied botany before about 1990 is now called Fabaceae instead of the old plant family name Leguminosae. Scientists like to change the names of things like this to keep us on our toes. Members of this family, which includes all the beans and peas, soybeans, kudzu, and many others, are able through their association with microorganisms to take nitrogen from the air and literally "fertilize" themselves. This is in large degree the reason wisteria is able to thrive in the poor soils of this area, plus it is able to tolerate low pH and varying moisture, traits which make it perfectly suited to our soils. There are something like nine or ten varieties differing in growth habit, flower color, length of flower clusters, aroma, and other characteristics.

Shrubs and trees may be overtaken by Wisteria by strangling and shading. The climbing vines can kill sizeable trees, opening the forest canopy and increasing sunlight to the forest floor, which in turn favors its aggressive growth. The plant is capable of forming thickets so dense that little else is able to grow.

Chinese wisteria was brought into the United States from China in 1816 as an ornamental plant. It has been grown in the southern part of the country as decorative addition to porches, gazebos, walls, and gardens. Most infestations considered undesirable are the result of escapes

from landscape plantings. Many people in this area probably consider wisteria a pest, but for a short time every year all the objections are forgotten as it offers evidence that spring has arrived in all its glory. For all its beauty however, it is actually poisonous.

For those tempted by the beauty of this hardy plant, wisteria is very easy to establish. Just dig up one of the underground stems, called stolons, and bury in a spot that stays relatively moist most of the time. Within two to three weeks you should see young shoots emerging from the soil; when they reach sunlight they will grow rapidly, and the plant will begin to send deep roots into the soil. By the end of the first year the vines can easily cover a normal sized trellis. To cover an eyesore, plant several of these stolons about two feet apart and after a couple of years you will not have to look at it any more because the vines will have totally covered it.

This is where the real fun begins, because this plant may take over a lot more area than you intended. Mowing will not stop it because it is capable of sending runners under the grass to nearby trees and shrubs. These runners will have to be found and cut to prevent the plant's spread. If you really like it, just let it go and it will cover everything and be there for your grandchildren to either fight or enjoy. Either way it will unquestionably announce spring until someone turns the area into a parking lot in the next century.